Author

An Enquiry into the CAUSES *of the* DECLINE *of* RELIGION.

A

SERMON

Preached in the High-Church of Glaſgow,

April 14th, 1761.

At the opening of the SYNOD of Glaſgow and Ayr.

By WILLIAM THOM, A. M.

MINISTER of GOVAN.

Publiſhed at the Special Deſire and Recommendation of the SYNOD.

GLASGOW:

Printed for ROBERT URIE.

Sold by JOHN BARRY, at his Shop above the Croſs.

MDCCLXI.

An Enquiry into the Causes of the
Decline of Religion.

A

SERMON

Preached in the High-Church of Glasgow,

April 14th, 1761.

At the opening of the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr.

By WILLIAM LEECHMAN, A.M.

Minister at Govan.

Published at the Special Desire and Recommendation of the Synod.

GLASGOW:

Printed for ROBERT URIE.

Sold by John Barry, at his Shop below the Cross.

MDCCLXI.

2 TIM. iv. 10.

DEMAS HATH FORSAKEN ME, HAVING LOVED THIS PRESENT WORLD.——

THAT religion is decayed, hath, for a long time, been the general complaint. We cannot ſee into the hearts of men, ſo as to make a juſt eſtimate of the regard they have to God; we can only judge from their outward behaviour; and in this reſpect, the complaint ſeems to be but too well founded. Men grow leſs and leſs ſtrict in the profeſſion of religion, and the number of thoſe, who profeſs it, ſeems to be gradually diminiſhing. It is not maintained, that a man can have no devotion and rectitude of heart, if he neglects the forms of religion, that are ſettled, or generally eſteemed, in the country where he lives; but if one has real religion, he will very readily have ſome profeſſion: and it is alſo commonly believed, that he, who decently profeſſes re-

ligion, will have more virtue, and be a better member of ſociety, than one who has no ſuch profeſſion. Since, then, an outward profeſſion is preſumed to flow from an inward ſenſe of religion; and ſince religion is ſuppoſed to contribute to the virtue and good order of the world at preſent, and is confeſſedly neceſſary to the happineſs of men in the world to come; is it really true, that it grows to be leſs and leſs in requeſt? and if ſo, what are the cauſes of this its decline?

DEMAS, ſays the apoſtle in the text, "Demas "hath forſaken me, having loved this preſent "world." In our times, it is not one only, there are many, who, it is to be feared, have loſt the reality, at leaſt they have forſaken the profeſſion, of religion, and have forſaken it, as Demas did, from love and attachment to this preſent world.

FROM the text, I might take occaſion to obſerve, that, in theſe corrupted times, many have forſaken the profeſſion of religion; and then ſhew, that it is from love to this world that they have done ſo.

But I, almoſt, take it for granted, that men are much leſs regular in their profeſſion of religion, than they were fifty, or even thirty, years ago. Is the ſabbath as religiouſly obſerved now, as it was then? are the churches as much reſorted to by people of all ranks, and of every condition? is family-religion as much in faſhion? pious aged people lament that there is a very wide and remarkable difference. Could men formerly have undertaken journeys of buſineſs upon the ſabbath, or have rode abroad for amuſement, or viſits of ceremony? could they have tranſacted their buſineſs at home, or met in one another's houſes, and ſpent the hours of public worſhip, in feaſting, drinking, and diverſion? could they have done theſe things half a century ago, without being wondered at, and without ſhocking the world much more than it is at preſent, when ſo many are guilty of ſuch rude and offenſive practices? have not even many of the people, who attend our churches, loſt the ſerious and religious air? and do they not too much wear the looks of careleſſneſs, indifference, or levity?

THESE, and many other things that might be mentioned, are ſtrong indications, that a change has happened to the worſe; and I preſume, that even the profane are convinced, that religion has declined. Let us then proceed to what we chiefly intend, —— to enquire into the cauſes of this affecting appearance. I think there is a propriety in the enquiry; if there were no profeſſion of religion, there needed be, and there would be, no public teachers of it.

AND as this is a topic, which, for ought I know, has not been commonly treated, I truſt to the candor of you, my reverend and much eſteemed fathers and brethren. If I ſhall appear to have miſtaken views, as it is exceedingly poſſible I may have; or, if I ſhall advance any thing that is not juſt, I am under your correction, and my miſtakes, whatever they are, ſhall not, I am ſure, be pertinaciouſly defended, or adhered to.

I BEGIN my ſubject: and I might account for the preſent irreligion——from the depravity of

human nature——from infidelity, or disbelief of religious principles——from a general ſcepticiſm, or indifference about religion — or from God's having withdrawn his grace, to puniſh the world for their profanity and wickedneſs. But ſtill theſe very things are appearances that need to be accounted for. From what cauſes has the world become more wicked of late, than it was before, ſo as to provoke God to withdraw his grace? whence is it, that infidelity, ſcepticiſm, and indifference about religion, have grown ſo faſt in the preſent age? and if it be true, whence is it, that human nature is more depraved in this, than it was in the laſt generation? Theſe general allegations, whatever truth there may be in them, ſeem not ſufficient to account for the preſent profaneneſs andirreligion of men. I think it becomes us to enquire more minutely into the ſubject, and to aſſign, if poſſible, ſome more particular and determinate cauſes of the evil complained of.

Every alteration in the moral world is produced by the agency of God. By his powerful working, men improve in virtue and religion,

and by his adorable permiſſion, they become vicious and profane. But, as I take it, every general change of this ſort is brought about by the means, or with the concomitancy, of ſecond or external cauſes. Religion gets footing in a country, when outward circumſtances are favourable to its reception; when theſe outward circumſtances are unfavourable, it declines and loſes ground.

The outward ſtate of things in this kingdom, at preſent, bears no friendly aſpect to religion: and hence, it is apprehended, the growth of profaneneſs may, at leaſt, in a great meaſure, be accounted for. The particulars, I am going to mention, will be too evident ſymptoms of man's corruption, and his being ſwayed by the ſame motive that Demas was —— love to a preſent world.

First, A long national peace and proſperity have contributed to our throwing religion aſide. It may be thought that ſuch bleſſings ſhould excite thankfulneſs, and keep religion alive. But thankfulneſs for the greateſt good is but of little force in religion, in compariſon of the

feeling or fear of great evil. This may be underſtood, by obſerving the oppoſite effects, which proſperity and adverſity, peace and diſturbance, have upon particular perſons. When is it that an individual has moſt religion and moſt the appearance of it? is it not when he is in outward diſtreſs, or when ſome dreaded calamity hangs over his head? when is it that he is moſt cool and careleſs about God? is it not when he is in a ſtate of affluence and eaſe? When he was afflicted, or when he was terrified at the proſpect of worldly trouble, he was ſerious and appeared to be ſo; when the cloud blows over without doing him harm, he turns back to the world, and loſes the ſerious temper, and the ſerious appearance. Apply this to a whole nation, that has long enjoyed proſperity and peace, and it will be evident, how that, which affects an individual, operates widely, extends its influence, and becomes almoſt univerſal. Beſides, when there has been, for a long time, peace and quiet about religion itſelf, men grow remiſs about the profeſſion of it. If a convulſion has been raiſed in a country, if a people have been threatened with having their religion changed, or violently torn from them, if a toleration of it has been

refuſed, or, if ſome diſputes, that are univerſally intereſting, have been raiſed and agitated about it, men will likely, for a long time, be tenacious of their religion, and zealous in profeſſing it. But we have not, for many years, been much in danger of a change of our religion; no force has been uſed againſt it, nor have the people intereſted themſelves deeply in any controverſy about it, either againſt the adverſaries of revelation from without, or againſt any particular tenets or opinions among themſelves. I ſuppoſe that what is here ſaid may be ſupported by matter of fact, and verified by ſurveying the ſtate of the world, ſince the commencement of Chriſtianity. A time of peace was ever a time of indolence about religion. When it was not tolerated, or when men were in danger of loſing it, they grew the fonder of it. When warm conteſts were maintained by Chriſtians themſelves about it, however theſe might embitter their ſpirits, and weaken the power of religion upon their hearts, yet they ſtuck the faſter to the outward profeſſion of it. Not that what is ſuggeſted by an eminent French writer * is juſt or true, namely, that re-

* MONTAIGNE.

ligion is ſo thin a thing "that it had vaniſhed "and melted through our fingers, had it not "more upheld itſelf amongſt us, as an inſtru-"ment of diſpute and faction, than by itſelf." Real Religion is not a flimſy, but a firm and ſolid, thing, and every pious man finds it to be ſo. Thoughtleſs people have not this reality, and their profeſſion of religion may be more or leſs regular from what is now mentioned, and from other external cauſes.

SECONDLY, This is an age wherein commerce flouriſhes, and riches have greatly encreaſed, and both theſe, it ſhould ſeem, are unfriendly even to the profeſſion of religion. A rich man, our Saviour ſays, ſhall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven. At firſt, they were the poor that came and heard the goſpel preached, and not many mighty or noble were obedient to the call of it. Review the hiſtory of the planting of religion; they were the poor who received it, they were generally the rich who oppoſed it. In the poorer cities and nations, it is believed, a greater proportion of the people embraced it. In the richer ones, the greateſt numbers were more backward and ſlow to believe it; and if our own country had been

as rich, or as intent on riches, when the gospel was firſt preached to it, as it is at preſent, it may be queſtioned whether or not it would have embraced it. When one is rich, or makes haſte to be ſo, he cares not to give himſelf any trouble about religion at all; if he is in the keen purſuit of riches, no ſpiritual thought employs his mind; the God of this world has full poſſeſſion of his heart; he has little or no ſenſe of religion, and except it be for ſome low worldly end, he has no appearance of it. If his fortune is already made, his time and attention are almoſt as much ſwallowed up in managing or ſpending, as they were in acquiring it: he fares ſumptuouſly every day, his mind is enfeebled, his thoughts are diſſipated, he wants to make a figure in life, and he is inſenſible and forgetful of God. Feeling no wants, he aſks no bleſſings; proud of his knowlege, he thinks he needs not be told his duty. If, on a rare occaſion, he countenances public worſhip, he declares by his looks, that he thinks he is deſcending from his dignity, and is doing a very humble thing. In ſhort, if he has firſt profeſſed religion, and then becomes opulent, he loſes the ſenſe, and ſhakes off the profeſſion of it. This certainly is

oftentimes the caſe: nay as irreligion is an ordinary appendage of riches, there may be ſome, poor enough, and yet ſo vain, as to throw off the air of religion, merely that they may be reputed rich.

I DO not affirm that the country in general is in an opulent ſtate: no. The inequality among men is encreaſed, and miſery is encreaſed and multiplied in proportion. A few are enriched, the many are in ſtraits, or benumed with conſtant drudgery and ſevere toil; their heavy labour and anxiety operate upon them, not like a temporary affliction, but render their minds groſs, ſtupid, and material. Sometimes born down by the rich, and always by the wretchedneſs of their condition, they are as the "Aſs that coucheth down between "two burdens." Their ſpirits are depreſſed, and nailed and fixed, as it were, to the earth; many of them have no ſenſe of religion, and as little appearance of it.

AND as the rich and great forſake religion, the middle and lower claſſes of mankind follow them, and are gradually ſliding into the ſame

profaneneſs. They are the nobles, they are the great and opulent, who lead the faſhions of the world; they keep religion in repute, when they appear to have it; they leave it to be thought a mean and vulgar thing when they forſake it. To a great many of the ordinary people, their very blemiſhes appear amiable, their vices reſpectable, and their impiety excuſable, or worthy of imitation: ſo that, in various ways, riches are the cauſe or occaſion of irreligion. We have hiſtories of the courſe of trade and commerce, and many directions how to get rich; but had we a moral hiſtory of riches, that is, of the effects that they invariably produce upon the benevolence and devotion of mankind, I am perſuaded, we would have ſet before our eyes, a more dark and unpleaſing theory, than perhaps we imagine. The friends of religion might be amazed at it.

THIRDLY, Men forſake religion, becauſe their honour and worldly intereſt are ſo little connected with the profeſſion of it. If the thing were eſteemed honourable, if a man's reputation were firmly eſtabliſhed by it, if it were a ſure

mean by which he could riſe in the army or in the ſtate, he might be a hypocrite, but he would, doubtleſs, be a very decent profeſſor: but no ſuch profeſſion is neceſſary to be a general, or a ſtateſman, or a judge, or a member of the legiſlative body of the kingdom. And as men gain little or nothing by a religious profeſſion, neither are they in danger of loſing any thing by the want of it. One's profaneneſs brings little diſreſpect upon him, he is hardly the worſe received in any company, and it puts him in no danger of loſing any part of his fortune. In the time of Charles I. many of our great people, we are told, crouded to church, with a demure countenance and a mighty ſerious air: not chiefly, I ſuppoſe, becauſe that prince was attempting an alteration of the eſtabliſhed religion; that, indeed, alarmed the lower ſort; but the great were alarmed, becauſe the king was revoking the grants to the tithes and church lands, which they were in poſſeſſion of. Hence their zealous profeſſion, that they might be ſupported by the clergy and the people; and ſo enabled to cruſh the king's meaſures, and preſerve and ſecure what they had got. While

the danger laſted, their profeſſion ſeemed edifying; when the ſtorm was over, it relaxed prodigiouſly.

I AM not contending, that religious profeſſion ought always to be rewarded with lucrative offices, or places of honour and truſt: but if religion is eſteemed to be of any importance, I ſhould think, that when competitors, for an office, are nearly alike in virtue and ability, the decent religious man ought to be preferred. This might gently bend the world to think more favourably of religion.

STILL leſs am I urging, that religion ought to be inforced by civil laws. It is of a ſpiritual nature, and is beſt promoted by ſpiritual motives. When, in a late reign, there were laws compelling men to go to church, under ſevere penalties; timorous people would then profeſs religion, and the aſſemblies might be thronged with the poor, and even with the rich. A remedy deſperate and ineffectual! and which could never have been thought of, but by thoſe who were either ignorant of the ſpirit of reli-

gion, and the ſacred rights of conſcience; or who wanted to trample upon the liberties of mankind, and inthral them in a dreadful yoke of ſlavery.—By the way, one cannot but wonder that ſome ingenious men, in the preſent age, who diſcover no liking to religious profeſſion, ſeem to applaud theſe or the like meaſures, as wholſome ſeverities: meaſures! which, were they now to be purſued, themſelves would be the firſt to feel and lament the rigor of them. When the ableſt men take it upon them to defend, or palliate ſuch abſurdities in government, they undertake a taſk which no man is equal to.

But as ſuch laws are altogether wrong, ſo in the preſent age, they would be more abſurd and ineffectual than ever. They would be directly oppoſite to the genius of the times, to the manners and faſhions of the country: every body would diſlike them, and the general bias is ſo ſtrong towards licentiouſneſs and irreligion, that ſuch laws would deſtroy themſelves. The execution of them would be utterly impracticable.

Fourthly, The knowlege men have, or think they have, attained in religion may be mentioned as a cauſe of their irreligion. I do not maintain it as a certain point, that there is more real learning, or a greater number of thorough enquirers, in this age, than there were in the laſt. But a kind of eaſy and ſuperficial knowlege ſeems to have become more general; and men ſoon come to think they have got enough of religious knowlege. But there is a great miſtake that cannot be got driven out of the minds of moſt of our people. They fancy the great, or only, end of going to church is to hear ſermon, and get inſtruction; and yet is it not evident, that the chief end of it is to worſhip God, in a public and a ſocial manner? There ſeems, in this reſpect, to be more propriety in the ſtile ſaid to be uſed in a neighbouring church, than that which is in faſhion among ourſelves. They aſk, where are you going to prayers? and we, where are you to hear ſermon?

Fifthly, The plain and ſcriptural way in which religion is taught in this church, does, I

believe, diminiſh the number of its profeſſors. It is a great imperfection of mankind, that many of them care little to hear things which they are capable of knowing, and which when known are likely to be of moſt advantage to them. They like well to hear of ſome dark points, and abſtruſe ſpeculations. Theſe were, perhaps, rather too much inſiſted on in the laſt age; but towards that extreme, I am of opinion, the preſent age, in general, have not erred. They have, I apprehend, rather loſt their influence with the people, by preaching in a rational and practical manner. Strange! that it ſhould ſo happen. Shall I be thought to derograte from the common ſenſe of mankind, by alleging it? I fear, however, it is the caſe. Is it not to be lamented, that the pure religion of the new teſtament, unadorned with pomp, and unmixed with ſuperſtition, does not take a deeper hold of the groveling minds of corrupted men —— is not more likely to be popular, and to continue to be ſo? One thing I am ſorry to advance; that it happened in ſome places, that the genuine religion of Jeſus could not be received, till ſomething human was blended with it, or

ad jected to it to adapt it to the notions of ignorant and worldly men. It was this, alas! that firſt gave riſe to the abſurdities of popery, and to all the inventions of men, in the worſhip of God. The church hiſtorians tell us, that ſome of the antient fathers were ſo weak, as to inſtitute rites and ſports and feſtivals, very like thoſe which had been long in uſe, to prevail on the idolatrous and ſtupid people, to renounce heatheniſm, and embrace the goſpel.

The religion, eſtabliſhed and taught in this church, has, I believe, leſs of human invention, and leſs mixture of ſuperſtition, than, perhaps, any other eſtabliſhment; and yet ſomething, ſimilar to what I have juſt mentioned, has, I fear, been formerly practiſed; I mean a ſtudying not always to deliver the ideas of ſcripture, pure and unmixed, but to accommodate them to the wiſhes and expectation of the hearers. What pity, that there ſhould be any occaſion to do this! or that any teacher ſhould ſtrive thus "to pleaſe men!" what pity is it, that preaching the goſpel of Chriſt, in its native ſim-

plicity, ſhould make men diſlike it, and forſake it; and yet this is ſometimes the fact. The doctrines of the goſpel are ſublime, intereſting, and comfortable; the pureſt morality is founded upon them, and recommended by them. If this morality is explained; if the vices, ſo often condemned in the new teſtament, are inſiſted on and expoſed; if you deſcend to particulars, and ſhew, that ſwearing, perjury, covetouſneſs, lying, fraud, injuſtice, oppreſſion, pride, intemperance, and debauchery, are inconſiſtent with the Chriſtian character; if you enjoin, as our great Maſter has commanded, the neceſſity of devotion, of juſtice, of reſtitution, of truth, of meekneſs, of temperance, of ſelf-denial, of brotherly-love and charity, the people yawn, and hear you with diſguſt; they go away, and are in no haſte to return to hear ſuch doctrine.

The theatre is thronged to, by the power of an artful, a bewitching, and dangerous adulation. It is ſaid to be a picture of the paſſions and vices and follies of men: but to get a crouded houſe, the painters are forced to condemn the

vices which the audience have not, and to flatter and foment thoſe they have. If they painted to the life the temper, and the vices of thoſe who reſort to them, they would ſoon be offended and withdraw; unwilling to be mortified with the view of their real ſelves. How dreadful if ever the pulpit ſhould be debaſed in this manner! or ſhould ever verge towards any art of that kind! One had better never preach at all, or cry in a deſart, as be guilty of any ſuch groſs and criminal proſtitution.

SIXTHLY, The want of pomp and ſhow, in our manner of worſhip, tends, perhaps, to diminiſh the number of profeſſors. From the eſtabliſhment of our conſtitution, the public ſervices of religion have been done with much ſimplicity, and without any thing of glare: nothing to ſtrike the ſenſes, or entertain the imagination of the worſhippers. Not that, I imagine, there is any value in that worſhip, which is altogether occaſioned by outward ſhow: no. It is the ſpirituality of worſhip which gives it value. "God is a ſpirit, and they that wor-
"ſhip him, muſt worſhip him in ſpirit and

"in truth." But where the right inward principle is weak or a wanting, external things may have ſome influence on religious profeſſion. And I believe, our worſhip is leſs attractive, or at leaſt is performed in leſs decent places, than might, at firſt, be intended. This proceeds from the ſelfiſhneſs of the age, and their backwardneſs to be at any expence about ſacred things. Churches have been erected and endowed by the piety of our forefathers, in the times of poverty and ſimplicity; had theſe things been left to this age of riches and commerce, it may be very queſtionable whether or not they would ever have been done. We might have had none or fewer places of public worſhip, and inſtead of the ſcanty proviſions for the teachers of righteouſneſs, there might have been no ſuch proviſions at all.

The attachment of a country to religion, may, in general, be eſtimated from the ſtate, and condition of it's religious buildings. When men are under the power of devotion, well or ill directed, they ſcruple not at any expence in this matter. When they are cool and irreligious,

they can be at none. The magnificence of ſuch buildings, as it flows from a reſpect to religion, it tends alſo to preſerve that reſpect. Men were formerly affected with external objects juſt as we now are. We look, with a ſolemn and religious awe, upon the grand and ſtately edifice, within which I now ſtand; with a like veneration, we behold the vaſt and magnificent ruins of many ſuch domes, and ſtructures throughout the country. Our churches, in general, are diminutive objects, and have nothing ſtriking about them. I believe there is no Chriſtian country, where theſe are in ſo ſorry a ſtate. They ought to bear ſome proportion to the ſplendor of the age, and to the public and private buildings in preſent uſe. But men live luxurioufly "in their ceiled houſes, "while the houſe of God lies waſte." This is both a proof of our irreligion, and it is alſo a cauſe of it. Have men religion? why, then, are the temples of the living God in ruin? why are the worſhipping places in ſuch a ſtate of naſtineſs and diſrepair? why in many places does it coſt ſuch a ſtruggle to get them repaired in the cheap, the coarſe, and ſlovenly manner in

which they are? though there are laws long ſince made, and ſtill in force for ſuch reparations. Do not the bulk of mankind conclude at once that religion muſt be of very ſmall importance, when they ſee the rich and great, who are reputed wiſe, ſo averſe to be at any expence about it? do they not from this cauſe think ſlightly of religion, and turn indifferent about profeſſing it? and do not the people of better faſhion "forſake the aſſembling of themſelves?" avowedly declaring that our churches are ſo ruinous, that they are nauſeous and offenſive to them, ſo cold as to endanger their health, and that they want a more neat and better ſheltered place to worſhip God in.

SEVENTHLY, I add, that religion is leſs profeſſed, becauſe of the low appointments of its teachers. I am not aſhamed to ſay it, becauſe, I believe and know it to be true, that the poor proviſions of clergymen are a cauſe that the profeſſion of religion declines. Theſe proviſions, when they were *modified*, might be ſufficient or tolerable through the bounty and generoſity that were then in faſhion; but they are far from being ſo in this rich, expenſive, and ſelfiſh age.

In every nation that is what we call civilized, the ideas of contempt, and of ignorance, are inſeparable from poverty, and the idea of knowlege is connected with riches. "This wiſdom, ſays Solomon *, have I ſeen under "the ſun, and it ſeemed great unto me: there was "a little city, and few men within it; and there "came a great king againſt it, and beſieged it, "and built bulwarks againſt it: and there was "found in it a poor wiſe man, and he by his "wiſdom delivered the city; yet no man re-"membered that ſame poor man. Then ſaid "I, wiſdom is better than ſtrength: neverthe-"leſs the poor man's wiſdom is deſpiſed, and "his words are not heard." Agreeably to this antient obſervation, the ſentiments of all men, and eſpecially of the rich, are. What ſenſe can you expect from one who has ſo little to ſpend, who entertains ſo few, who fares ſo ſimply, and is ſo coarſly dreſſed. This has been long the common train of thinking; but never more ſo; perhaps, never ſo much ſo, as in the preſent times. It is wealth that procures reſpect;

* Eccl. ix. 13.—16.

little matter whether it be derived from anceſtors, or ſuddenly acquired, or got by means right or wrong; the man poſſeſſed of it is held in honour; it gives him the reputation of wiſdom and knowlege. The clergy are poor, and therefore ſuppoſed to be ignorant; how can it, the world thinks, be worth the while to go to a place of worſhip, where a low and ignorant perſon leads in the ſervice. This, I believe, is the ſilent reaſoning of very great numbers. Hence it is in part, as well as from the cauſes mentioned above, that thoſe who are nearly upon a level with us, or not far above us, in their circumſtances and way of living, have commonly a decent profeſſion and reſort to our churches: theſe, who are wealthy and abound in riches, have, in many places, almoſt totally deſerted us. They imagine, that as they have got more riches, they have likewiſe got more knowlege, than their teachers; or they are aſhamed to join in worſhip with, or ſeem to have their duty told them by thoſe who are ſo very far below them. Sometime ago, an attempt was made for a remedy, very inadequate to the laſt mentioned cauſe of irreligion: but though

little was ſought, nothing was obtained; and it is likely no remedy may be thought of, till it ſhall be too late: and then, as in other caſes, the wonder may be, that a thing ſo obviouſly neceſſary was ſo long neglected. Ah for the days of antient ſimplicity! when virtue was practiſed, and religion was in faſhion; when men were not yet civilized into atheiſm, covetouſneſs, and ferocity of temper; when riches had not juſtled out the ſentiments of humanity and devotion; and when men were more afraid of being cruel and profane, than of being poor, or appearing to be ſo.

THERE is ſtill another thing, which, may be, it is expected I ſhould mention. Some weak and well-meaning people, joined and perhaps ſet on by others of a different caſt, would be very willing to aſcribe all the growing profaneneſs and irreligion to the clergy themſelves; lamenting, that the miniſters of the laſt age were much purer and better than we are. That the clergy may be in part blameable, may be owned. We never pretended to be perfect; and no man of juſt diſcernment

will expect, that we alone ſhall be totally exempted from the influence of theſe cauſes which tend to ſlacken the profeſſion of religion: but I will be bold to affirm, that the preſent clergy of Scotland, in general, are as unblemiſhed in their lives, have as much purity and regularity of manners, and are poſſeſſed of as wide an extent of knowlege of things, human and divine, as any equal number of churchmen, of like fortunes, in the known world: nay, I will further ſay, that there are many of them, who, in point of ability, are no-ways inferior to thoſe, who are eminent in the other learned profeſſions in the nation. Their regularity in preaching, and diligence in their other miniſterial labours, are well known; and if it will give any eaſe and quiet to the complainers, I believe I can aſſure them, that at the diſtance of a century hereafter, the preſent generation of miniſters will be juſt as much eſteemed and regreted, as theſe now are, who have lived a hundred years before them. "A prophet," it is ſaid, "has not honour in "his own country," and he may alſo miſs of it in his own time.

To all the above cauſes, the operation of which is ſo viſible and ſo certain, we may ſubjoin, that there are, perhaps, ſome, who are wickedly active to promote impiety; who labour, by their looſe and worldly ſpeeches, to puſh forward the irreligion of the age. Are there really ſome "preſumptuous and ſelf-"willed, who ſtrive to beguile unſtable ſouls, "and ſeek to turn away men from the faith," by queſtioning the certainty, and vilifying the importance, of divine revelation? are there ſome, who, having their hearts entirely ſet on this world, call upon others to neglect religion, and to purſue riches and honours, as the chief, or the only, portion of man? are there ſome voluptuous perſons, who are buſy to exterminate all ſenſe and profeſſion of religion, to leſſen the horror of vice, to irritate the paſſions of men, and "to allure, through "the luſts of the fleſh, through much wan-"tonneſs, thoſe who were almoſt eſcaped "from them that live in error?" To any ſuch perſon, might not one ſpeak in the ſpirited and aweful words of the great apoſtle Paul to

Elymas the ſorcerer, "O full of all ſubtilty and of all miſchief, thou child of the "devil, thou enemy of all righteouſneſs, wilt "thou not ceaſe to pervert the right ways of "the Lord *?" Behold the hand of God is lifted up above thy head; inſtead of being ſtruck at the ſight of thy fellow-creatures hurrying to the pit of deſtruction, wilt thou, as by a forcible arm, drive them into it? Stop, reverence thy God, pity thy periſhing brethren, and prevent the dreadful ruin of thine own immortal ſoul.

I HAVE done——I have mentioned what appear to me, to be ſome of the cauſes or occaſions of our irreligion; cauſes, moſtly ariſing from the preſent ſtate and circumſtances of the world. Through a long proſperity, men are become indolent and thoughtleſs — Riches engroſs their affections, and conſume their time — the grave profeſſor meets with no honour or advantage above the profane — the public ſervices of religion are performed with an un-attracting ſimplicity — and the teachers of it are poorly ſupported and deſpiſed.

* Acts xiii. 10.

It is not eaſy to find a remedy, that ſhall prove effectual againſt this growing evil. In other caſes, it is ſaid, that when the nature and cauſes of the diſeaſe are once explored, it becomes eaſy to preſcribe the cure. I wiſh it were ſo in the caſe before us. But I violently ſuſpect, that before religion can be profeſſed with that decency and regularity which it merits, there muſt, firſt, be a great alteration in the outward ſtate of things, (an alteration, neither expected, nor deſired,) and ſtill as great a one in the hearts of men. I fear that we can hardly expect, in our times, either that humanity or that regard to God, which were the characteriſtics of the plain and un-poliſhed ages, long ſince paſt. But nothing is impoſſible with God.

The moſt certain and ſpecific antidote againſt profaneneſs, in oppoſition to ſo many cauſes which accelerate its courſe, would be, "to live by faith and not by ſight," I mean, to live in the habitual and over-powering belief of the reality, and of all the terrors and

glories of the inviſible world: and we ought to have this faith ſtrong, in proportion to the ſtriking objects and cauſes that labour to ſeduce us. By vigorous and repeated efforts, we ought to keep eternity full in our view, that we may be proof againſt the powerful contagion and fallacious charms of the preſent world. If we have the reality of religion, how can we miſs to have the appearance of it. "If * we have that faith which is the ſub-"ſtance of things hoped for, and the evidence "of things not ſeen;" this will counter-work the cauſes that operate towards irreligion. "For this is that victory that overcometh "the world, even our faith: and, who is he "that overcometh the world, but he that be-"lieveth that Jeſus is the ſon of God †."

But I do not know how; we ſeem very much to want this faith. While we complain, that religion has decayed, we are but half in earneſt. We are at the ſame time, perhaps, with more keenneſs, wiſhing and praying for a ſtill greater influx of wealth into our country:

* Heb. xi. 1. † 1. John v. 4, 5.

wealth! which has already rendered us covetous and rapacious, has debauched our morals, eraſed religion out of our hearts, and left us but little of the outward ſemblance of it. How far we think and wiſh conſiſtently, if we have faith, and look upon eternity as our chief concern; or how far it is poſſible to unite the keen commercial ſpirit and the ſpirit of devotion —— I will not determine.

One thing I am ſure of, that a conſtant and lively exerciſe of faith is neceſſary to reſiſt the temptations of the preſent world. The air we breathe in, the company we talk with, is infectious: knowlege, virtue, religion, if detached from riches, are deſpiſed: an avidity of riches appears in the air, the looks, the words of every one; nothing, nothing is commended but that which tends to ſtifle devotion, and wear off the appearance of it. Serious people ſtand by, ſee and lament the diſregard that is ſhown to religion; and themſelves are catched hold of, and carried downwards by the current of faſhion, as if it were by the reſiſtleſs force of a ſwelled and impetuous river. How

often have I ſeen a man lament and abhor the danger of ſuch or ſuch a lucrative employment to the morals and religion of our youth; and yet, over-born by the ſtream of cuſtom, and tempted by the love of the world, put his own ſon to it. We can never withſtand ſuch force, and be firm in our religion, but by the energy of faith. We will prize our integrity, be content to be leſs rich, leſs regarded, and even to ſuffer affliction, if we have the unſhaken belief and hope of a happy immortality. This is the faith that ſupported Moſes. "By faith, Moſes when he was "come to years, refuſed to be called the ſon "of Pharaoh's daughter; chooſing rather to "ſuffer affliction with the people of God, "than to enjoy the pleaſures of ſin for a ſea"ſon: eſteeming the reproach of Chriſt "greater riches than the treaſures in Egypt— "for he had reſpect to the recompence of the "reward.*"

My reverend fathers and brethren! I hardly chooſe to make any addreſs to you, founded on the things I have advanced. In a

* Heb. xi. 24—26.

profane and corrupted age, you know the nature and importance of your paſtoral office; you do more; with firmneſs, and fidelity, and great labour you diſcharge it. If the things delivered were juſt, you can well make theſe concluſions, which may aſſiſt you to perſevere in your integrity, your ſteadfaſtneſs, and your uſeful endeavours to ſtem the torrent of irreligion. If your ſpirit is ſtirred in you at the coolneſs and indifference of the world; if you are grieved that many "forſake the aſſembling "of themſelves;" if you are afflicted at the growth of profaneneſs and irreligion; if yourſelves are unjuſtly loaded with the blame of that profaneneſs; if you have but poor appointments in proportion to your uſefulneſs, your great labour, and what ought to be your rank in ſociety——you have the peace of your own mind, the teſtimony of a good conſcience, and the aſſured hopes, of being one day with that Jeſus, whom you ſerve, and by whoſe faith you live. †"In all things approve your-"ſelves as the miniſters of God. In much "patience, in afflictions, in neceſſities, in de-

† 2 Cor. vi. 4.——10.

" ſtreſſes, in tumults, in labours, in watchings,
" in faſtings, by pureneſs, by knowlege, by long
" ſuffering, by kindneſs, by the Holy Ghoſt,
" by love unfeigned, by the word of truth,
" by the power of God, by the armour of
" righteouſneſs, on the right hand and on the
" left; by honour, and diſhonour; by evil re-
" port, and good report; as deceivers, and
" yet true; as unknown, and yet well known;
" as dying, and behold ye live; as chaſtened,
" and not killed; as ſorrowful, and yet al-
" ways rejoicing; as poor, and yet making
" many rich; as having nothing, and yet
" poſſeſſing all things." " After all, it is but
" a little while, and ye ſhall have fulfilled the
" miniſtry which ye have received of the
" Lord. The end of all things is at hand,
" and the faſhions of this world paſſeth away."
In this interval let the words of your com-
paſſionate and heavenly Maſter give you
courage and conſolation. * " Theſe things
" have I ſpoken unto you, that in me ye might
" have peace; in the world ye ſhall have tribu-

* John. xvi. 33.

- " lation, but be of good cheer, I have over-
" come the world."

I VERY ſhortly addreſs my ſelf to you, the people that are preſent. My brethren, he is baſe and infamous that forſakes his friend for worldly views; he is wretched and in a ſtate of perdition who forſakes his God and his religion from any views whatever; yet many, like Demas, have from worldly cauſes forſaken the profeſſion of religion. Will you follow their example? will you ſuffer yourſelves to be carried headlong by the faſhions of a profane and backſliding generation? where the faith of Jeſus is preached in purity, will you be offended at the ſimplicity of the worſhip, or the ſeverity of the duties the goſpel enjoins, or the low condition of its teachers, or becauſe no worldly honour or gain is annexed to a religious profeſſion? As Jeſus ſaid to his diſciples, after many had gone back, and walked no more with him, † " will ye alſo go away ?" I am perſuaded that, notwithſtanding the low ebb of religion, there are many of you who can anſwer with ſincerity, and with a zeal like that of

† John vi. 67, 68.

Simon Peter, " Lord, to whom ſhall we go " but unto thee; thou haſt the words of eter- " nal life, and we know, and are ſure, that " thou art that Chriſt, the ſon of the living God.

Let me beſeech you, who practiſe religion, to live ſuitably to it. If you are as unjuſt and hard-hearted, as covetous and cloſe-handed, as cruel and oppreſſive, as thoſe who have no religion; you might as well throw aſide the mantle too. You profeſs religion, and you practiſe wickedneſs; your temper and your actions are not hid from the diſcerning world; and I do not know, but your wickedneſs is one of the great cauſes of irreligion. Profane men ſee, that, whatever you profeſs, your conduct, and the motives of it, are as baſe as their own; and you become the wretched means of hardening them in their profaneneſs. Let there be no ground for any ſuch charge againſt you: " Let your light ſo ſhine before men, that " they may ſee your good works," may honour and profeſs religion, " and glorify your " Father who is in heaven *."

* Mat. v. 14.

To conclude, let us all addreſs our prayers to the throne of grace, that God may pour down his Spirit, to check the progreſs of irreligion, and revive his work, in theſe years, " when the love of many has waxed cold;" that the exalted Redeemer may " ride forth glorioufly, conquering, and to conquer;" that his arrows may ſharply pierce the hearts of men, and bring them in ſubjection unto himſelf; that the Almighty Spirit of grace may take hold of the hearts of men, and that this may appear, by their upright practice, and ſerious profeſſion: particularly, that God may enable us to be ſo influenced by faith, that we may never forſake religion, through the love of this preſent world.

" Now unto him that is able to keep us from
" falling, and to preſent us faultleſs before the
" preſence of his glory with exceeding joy; to
" the only wiſe God our Saviour, be glory and
" majeſty, dominion and power, now and ever.
" Amen."

BRITISH
16 AP 85
MUSEUM

THE END.